



**Rosh Hashanah – 5771**  
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***No Atheists in Foxholes***  
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A story is told about a group of rabbis who were on their way to Jerusalem when their flight ran into a storm that disabled the engines. One of the rabbis immediately called over the nervous flight attendant and said, “Could you please tell the pilot that everything will be all right because there are 13 very religious men aboard this plane, all of us praying for a miracle.”

A few minutes later, bravely making her way down the unsteady aisle, the flight attendant returned from the cockpit. “Excuse me, rabbi,” she said, “our pilot said to tell you that although he was pleased to learn that we have 13 holy men praying aboard this flight, he would still rather have just one good engine.”

Faith, as this story captures, can only get you so far.

There’s an old folk-saying: “There are no atheists in foxholes.” But, like most aphorisms, this one is not always true. In fact, sometimes it is precisely in the foxholes that we feel most abandoned, least cared for, wishing not for Divine might, but for just one good engine.

What do we do when life throws us in a foxhole? When we’ve been going along just fine and suddenly are facing illness or job-loss? When we think we’ve got the kids launched and instead they struggle and we struggle right along with them? When we get that call in the middle of the night that Mom has fallen and needs more care? When we’ve spent a lifetime saving for a comfortable retirement and our portfolio today would beg to differ, and now we’re looking at years more work, if we can keep it? When we looked forward to spending our golden age, hand

in hand, with the partner we've built a life with and suddenly they are gone, and we come home to an empty house night after night?

For some, it is exactly in those moments that we reach for, and find, God. But for others, not so much.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately as reports of one of the most famous atheists of our time have been making their way across the wires. Christopher Hitchens, author of, among other works, "God is not Great" – atheist extraordinaire who has made a career out of debating everyone from Salman Rushdie to Shmuley Boteach – has just been diagnosed with cancer. So the question on people's minds is, of course, "What does a renowned atheist do when he gets cancer?"

Answer: he doesn't budge. He says, "I can't see myself smiting my brow with shock or hear myself whining about how it's all so unfair. I have been taunting the reaper into taking a free scythe in my direction and have now succumbed to something so predictable and banal that it bores even me.

"To the dumb question, 'Why me?' the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: 'Why not.'"

He's got a point. That life is fraught and fragile is given poignant, terrifying voice in our own powerful *U'netaneh Tokef* prayers this morning. That it, whatever "it" may be, can happen to me just the same as to the person sitting next to me, and we won't know who or why or when, is exactly true.

All of us, without exception, are headed to the same end, to one day have to say that, as Hitchens so colorfully put it, "In whatever kind of 'race' life may be, I have very abruptly become a finalist."

George Carlin once said, “I tried to believe that there is a God, who created each of us in His own image and likeness, loves us very much and keeps a close eye on things. I really tried to believe that, but I gotta tell you, the longer you live, the more you look around, the more you realize...something is wrong here. War, disease, death, destruction, hunger, filth, poverty, torture, crime, corruption...This is not good work. Results like these do not belong on the resume of a Supreme Being...In any decently-run universe, this guy would’ve been out...a long time ago.”

So why turn to God today? Is it naïve, or weak, or as some have argued, even a “neurological disorder” to come here today seeking God to answer us, to speak to us, to help us to walk the paths of our lives?

After all, in some ways our vision of God today is even starker than George Carlin’s.

The *U’netaneh Tokef* insists that war and disease and death and hunger are built into the fabric of God’s order. But, in the final words, “*U’teshuva u’tefillah u’tzeddakah,*” we find that it is precisely the threat of our passing and our pain that animates the values of our lives. These words are not a cosmic short-cut for getting out of life’s hardships, but a prescription for walking with, and through them. While we do not know, and cannot control, our end, we can determine how we will live now, how we will respond to the challenges of life. And in doing that, God is a precious partner.

God gives us a possibility to look at a remarkably flawed world and see in it hope.

Journalist Kathleen Koch writes in her new book “Rising from Katrina”: “Five years ago when Hurricane Katrina was bearing down on New Orleans, I prayed. I prayed that the monster storm would spare the...residents of the city...That first week [after the storm] as I picked my way through the rubble..., I was in shock. My brain wanted to reject what my eyes were seeing.

Soon after, I got angry...For a long time, I gave up on God...I couldn't look at the suffering and destruction on the Gulf Coast and find anything to be thankful for.

“Still, miraculously, people were thankful... Like Tommy Kidd. Twenty-seven feet of water surged through his home on the bayou. Yet he spent weeks collecting supplies for family, friends and neighbors before even venturing out to see what he had left...And volunteers poured into the area by the thousands. It was inspiring,” Koch said, “and it started to melt my anger. A friend [said,] ‘It shows you that there really is a God’ [and there God was in] signs of hope, signs that as dire as things looked, residents were not alone.

“I took an accounting of my life,” Koch concludes, “and how it had changed because of that hurricane. I had connected to my hometown and the people I'd grown up with. I had built friendships with so many who had come to help...I was stronger, wiser, and more keenly aware of what mattered in life...

“On the fifth anniversary of Katrina things aren't back to normal and won't be for years...but I have faith that those I know and love there will do what seems to be ingrained in their DNA – to overcome, persevere and always remember what matters.”

God is that force that causes our hands, heads and hearts to work together to remember what really matters – to make our own small difference in the world and to see in that constructive inspiration the profound truth that hope is a choice we can make, no matter where the storms of our lives toss us.

Can we do good and live worthy lives without God? Of course. But there is an added element of purpose when we answer the ancient call of the prophet Micah to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.” Can we find meaning in our lives and our deaths, in the foxholes of our experience without God? Perhaps. But with God, we find not just meaning

but gratitude. For it is exactly those moments when we lack that we discover how much we have had.

That is the experience Rabbi Naomi Levy writes of in her upcoming memoir of her personal grappling when her then-5-year-old daughter, Noa, was diagnosed with a degenerative disease. Even though, through her own writings, she had taught thousands about prayer, she found herself in a very different place. “I was a rabbi,” she writes, “and God was no comfort to me.” “One day...these words suddenly popped into my head: ‘Where are you coming from and where are you going?’

“When I got home,” she writes, “I opened the Bible and began poring over the ancient story of Hagar...Sara[h] grew jealous when Hagar conceived and began to torment her [and Hagar ran away]. As she was wandering alone in the wilderness, an angel of God found her...He told her to go back...God had heard her suffering. Hagar took in the angel’s prophecy and said, ‘You are *El Roi*, the God who sees me.’

“I walked out to my backyard,” Rabbi Levy wrote, “sat on the grass and whispered ‘Can you see me? Can you see my Noa? What do you see?’ ...A calm descended upon my chest. A palpable presence seemed to be telling me, ‘I am with you,’ and I broke down and wept tears of gratitude...

“Later that night I wrote down these thoughts to myself. God believes in Noa... And God is praying we will come to see in ourselves what God already sees [and] is hoping we will live out the life that’s lying within us...The God Who Sees Me is calling ‘Where are you coming from and where are you going.’”

For Hitchens, we are alone in a cold, unfeeling universe. He is, in his final days, by his own account, alone, cynical, and bored. In summing up his thoughts about what may be the last chapter of his life, he writes, “I am badly oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste.”

Rabbi Levy, in the God who sees Hagar, who sees each of us, finds just the opposite. That our lives are not a waste, not just a matter of so many cells that came together for a short while and dissolve, but a part of a story – the story of a people, the story of a world, the story, ultimately of hope and possibility. It is that profound sense of presence, of connection, that sustains her, and inspires her to look to the future with courage.

The U’netaneh Tokef tells us what we all already know – that all of us, at some point, will find ourselves in the foxholes of life. When we are there, let us ask ourselves: will we barricade ourselves in our anger and disillusionment, or will we allow ourselves to be inspired to action by the God who sees us, who searches for us, and who is waiting for us? What will your story be?